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978-1-108-04417-2 - Lives of the Necromancers: Or, an Account of the Most Eminent Persons in Successive Ages, who have Claimed for Themselves, or to whom has been Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power

William Godwin

Frontmatter

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Lives of the Necromancers

The political philosopher and writer William Godwin (1756–1836), who was also the husband of writer Mary Wollstonecraft and father of Mary Shelley, was known for his philosophical works and novels. In this work, originally published in 1834, Godwin turns to the issue of the supernatural, and to some of the famous – and sometimes unexpected – people associated with it. He begins by defining some magic practices, such as divination, astrology, and necromancy, giving examples of the latter from the Bible. The remainder of the work consists of brief sketches of people and places involved in the occult world, beginning in the Ancient Middle East and Greece, surveying the Christian era in Europe, and ending with the New England witch trials. In a remarkable work of synthesis, he discusses apparently supernatural episodes in the lives of many historical figures, from Socrates and Virgil to Joan of Arc and James I.

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

P R E F A C E.

THE main purpose of this book is to exhibit a fair delineation of the credulity of the human mind. Such an exhibition cannot fail to be productive of the most salutary lessons.

One view of the subject will teach us a useful pride in the abundance of our faculties. Without pride man is in reality of little value. It is pride that stimulates us to all our great undertakings. Without pride, and the secret persuasion of extraordinary talents, what man would take up the pen with a view to produce an important work, whether of imagination and poetry, or of profound science, or of acute and subtle reasoning and intellectual anatomy? It is pride in this sense that makes the great general and the consummate legislator, that animates us to tasks the most la-

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William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi

PREFACE.

borious, and causes us to shrink from no difficulty, and to be confounded and overwhelmed with no obstacle that can be interposed in our path.

Nothing can be more striking than the contrast between man and the inferior animals. The latter live only for the day, and see for the most part only what is immediately before them. But man lives in the past and the future. He reasons upon and improves by the past; he records the acts of a long series of generations: and he looks into future time, lays down plans which he shall be months and years in bringing to maturity, and contrives machines and delineates systems of education and government, which may gradually add to the accommodations of all, and raise the species generally into a nobler and more honourable character than our ancestors were capable of sustaining.

Man looks through nature, and is able to reduce its parts into a great whole. He classes the beings which are found in it, both animate and inanimate, delineates and describes them, investigates their properties, and records their capacities, their good and evil qualities, their dangers and their uses.

Nor does he only see all that is; but he also

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William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE.

vii

images all that is not. He takes to pieces the substances that are, and combines their parts into new arrangements. He peoples all the elements from the world of his imagination. It is here that he is most extraordinary and wonderful. The record of what actually is, and has happened in the series of human events, is perhaps the smallest part of human history. If we would know man in all his subtleties, we must deviate into the world of miracles and sorcery. To know the things that are not, and cannot be, but have been imagined and believed, is the most curious chapter in the annals of man. To observe the actual results of these imaginary phenomena, and the crimes and cruelties they have caused us to commit, is one of the most instructive studies in which we can possibly be engaged. It is here that man is most astonishing, and that we contemplate with most admiration the discursive and unbounded nature of his faculties.

But, if a recollection of the examples of the credulity of the human mind may in one view supply nourishment to our pride, it still more obviously tends to teach us sobriety and humiliation. Man in his genuine and direct sphere is the dis-

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William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

PREFACE.

ciple of reason ; it is by this faculty that he draws inferences, exerts his prudence, and displays the ingenuity of machinery, and the subtlety of system both in natural and moral philosophy. Yet what so irrational as man? Not contented with making use of the powers we possess, for the purpose of conducing to our accommodation and well being, we with a daring spirit inquire into the invisible causes of what we see, and people all nature with Gods “of every shape and size” and angels, with principalities and powers, with beneficent beings who “take charge concerning us lest at any time we dash our foot against a stone,” and with devils who are perpetually on the watch to perplex us and do us injury. And, having familiarised our minds with the conceptions of these beings, we immediately aspire to hold communion with them. We represent to ourselves God, as “walking in the garden with us in the cool of the day,” and teach ourselves “not to forget to entertain strangers, lest by so doing we should repel angels unawares.”

No sooner are we, even in a slight degree, acquainted with the laws of nature, than we frame to ourselves the idea, by the aid of some invisible ally, of suspending their operation, of calling out

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William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE.

ix

meteors in the sky, of commanding storms and tempests, of arresting the motion of the heavenly bodies, of producing miraculous cures upon the bodies of our fellow-men, or afflicting them with disease and death, of calling up the deceased from the silence of the grave, and compelling them to disclose “the secrets of the world unknown.”

But, what is most deplorable, we are not contented to endeavour to secure the aid of God and good angels, but we also aspire to enter into alliance with devils, and beings destined for their rebellion to suffer eternally the pains of hell. As they are supposed to be of a character perverted and depraved, we of course apply to them principally for purposes of wantonness, or of malice and revenge. And, in the instances which have occurred only a few centuries back, the most common idea has been of a compact entered into by an unprincipled and impious human being with the sworn enemy of God and man, in the result of which the devil engages to serve the capricious will and perform the behests of his blasphemous votary for a certain number of years, while the deluded wretch in return engages to renounce his God and Saviour, and surrender himself body and

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William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

X

PREFACE.

soul to the pains of hell from the end of that term to all eternity. No sooner do we imagine human beings invested with these wonderful powers, and conceive them as called into action for the most malignant purposes, than we become the passive and terrified slaves of the creatures of our own imaginations, and fear to be assailed at every moment by beings to whose power we can set no limit, and whose modes of hostility no human sagacity can anticipate and provide against. But, what is still more extraordinary, the human creatures that pretend to these powers have often been found as completely the dupes of this supernatural machinery, as the most timid wretch that stands in terror at its expected operation; and no phenomenon has been more common than the confession of these allies of hell, that they have verily and indeed held commerce and formed plots and conspiracies with Satan.

The consequence of this state of things has been, that criminal jurisprudence and the last severities of the law have been called forth to an amazing extent to exterminate witches and witchcraft. More especially in the sixteenth century hundreds and thousands were burned alive within the com-

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William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE.

xi

pass of a small territory ; and judges, the directors of the scene, a Nicholas Remi, a De Lancre, and many others, have published copious volumes, entering into a minute detail of the system and fashion of the witchcraft of the professors, whom they sent in multitudes to expiate their depravity at the gallows and the stake.

One useful lesson which we may derive from the detail of these particulars, is the folly in most cases of imputing pure and unmingled hypocrisy to man. The human mind is of so ductile a character that, like what is affirmed of charity by the apostle, it “believeth all things, and endureth all things.” We are not at liberty to trifle with the sacredness of truth. While we persuade others, we begin to deceive ourselves. Human life is a drama of that sort, that, while we act our part, and endeavour to do justice to the sentiments which are put down for us, we begin to believe we are the thing we would represent.

To shew however the modes in which the delusion acts upon the person through whom it operates, is not properly the scope of this book. Here and there I have suggested hints to this purpose, which the curious reader may follow to their fur-

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William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

PREFACE.

the extent, and discover how with perfect good faith the artist may bring himself to swallow the grossest impossibilities. But the work I have written is not a treatise of natural magic. It rather proposes to display the immense wealth of the faculty of imagination, and to shew the extravagances of which the man may be guilty who surrenders himself to its guidance.

It is fit however that the reader should bear in mind, that what is put down in this book is but a small part and scantling of the acts of sorcery and witchcraft which have existed in human society. They have been found in all ages and countries. The torrid zone and the frozen north have neither of them escaped from a fruitful harvest of this sort of offspring. In ages of ignorance they have been especially at home; and the races of men that have left no records behind them to tell almost that they existed, have been most of all rife in deeds of darkness, and those marvellous incidents which especially astonish the spectator, and throw back the infant reason of man into those shades and that obscurity from which it had so recently endeavoured to escape.

I wind up for the present my literary labours

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE.

xiii

with the production of this book. Nor let any reader imagine that I here put into his hands a mere work of idle recreation. It will be found pregnant with deeper uses. The wildest extravagances of human fancy, the most deplorable perversion of human faculties, and the most horrible distortions of jurisprudence, may occasionally afford us a salutary lesson. I love in the foremost place to contemplate man in all his honours and in all the exaltation of wisdom and virtue ; but it will also be occasionally of service to us to look into his obliquities, and distinctly to remark how great and portentous have been his absurdities and his follies.

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Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power

William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS.

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
—	
AMBITIOUS NATURE OF MAN . . .	9
HIS DESIRE TO PENETRATE INTO FUTURITY	10
DIVINATION	11
AUGURY	<i>ib.</i>
CHIROMANCY	12
PHYSIOGNOMY	<i>ib.</i>
INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS	13
CASTING OF LOTS	14
ASTROLOGY	<i>ib.</i>
ORACLES	15
DELPHI	16
THE DESIRE TO COMMAND AND CONTROL	
FUTURE EVENTS	20

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-04417-2 - Lives of the Necromancers: Or, an Account of the Most Eminent Persons in Successive Ages, who have Claimed for Themselves, or to whom has been Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power

William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi

CONTENTS.

	Page
COMMERCE WITH THE INVISIBLE WORLD	20
SORCERY AND ENCHANTMENT	21
WITCHCRAFT	24
COMPACTS WITH THE DEVIL	25
IMPS	26
TALISMANS AND AMULETS	27
NECROMANCY	<i>ib.</i>
ALCHEMY	29
FAIRIES	32
ROSICRUCIANS	35
SYLPHS AND GNOMES, SALAMANDERS AND UNDINES	36

EXAMPLES OF NECROMANCY AND
WITCHCRAFT FROM THE BIBLE 39

THE MAGI, OR WISE MEN OF THE EAST	44
EGYPT	46
STATUE OF MEMNON	50
TEMPLE OF JUPITER AMMON: ITS ORACLES	51
CHALDEA AND BABYLON	54
ZOROASTER	55

GREECE	57
DEITIES OF GREECE	58
DEMIGODS	62
DÆDALUS	64
THE ARGONAUTS	66
MEDEA	67
CIRCE	70
ORPHEUS	<i>ib.</i>
AMPHION	74
TIRESIAS	75
ABARIS	76
PYTHAGORAS	77

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-04417-2 - Lives of the Necromancers: Or, an Account of the Most Eminent Persons in Successive Ages, who have Claimed for Themselves, or to whom has been Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power

William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS.	xvii
	Page
EPIMENIDES	92
EMPEDOCLES	95
ARISTEAS	98
HERMOTIMUS	99
THE MOTHER OF DEMARATUS, KING OF SPARTA	100
ORACLES	101
INVASION OF XERXES INTO GREECE	107
DEMOCRITUS	110
SOCRATES	112
—————	
ROME	119
VIRGIL	<i>ib.</i>
POLYDORUS	<i>ib.</i>
DIDO	120
ROMULUS	122
NUMA	<i>ib.</i>
TULLUS HOSTILIUS	124
ACCIUS NAVIUS	<i>ib.</i>
SERVIUS TULLIUS	125
THE SORCERESS OF VIRGIL	127
CANIDIA	129
ERICHTHO	133
SERTORIUS	146
CASTING OUT DEVILS	150
SIMON MAGUS	<i>ib.</i>
ELYMAS, THE SORCERER	153
NERO	155
VESPASIAN	<i>ib.</i>
APOLLONIUS OF TYANA	157
APULEIUS	164
ALEXANDER THE PAPHLAGONIAN	165
—————	

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-04417-2 - Lives of the Necromancers: Or, an Account of the Most Eminent Persons in Successive Ages, who have Claimed for Themselves, or to whom has been Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power

William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii	CONTENTS.	Page
REVOLUTION PRODUCED IN THE HISTORY OF NECROMANCY AND WITCHCRAFT UPON THE ESTA- BLISHMENT OF CHRISTIANITY		
		171
MAGICAL CONSULTATIONS RESPECTING THE LIFE OF THE EMPEROR		
		173
—————		
HISTORY OF NECROMANCY IN THE EAST		
		177
GENERAL SILENCE OF THE EAST RESPECT- ING INDIVIDUAL NECROMANCERS		
		185
ROCAIL		
		187
HAKEM, OTHERWISE MACANNA		
		188
ARABIAN NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENTS		
		189
PERSIAN TALES		
		195
STORY OF A GOULE		
		201
ARABIAN NIGHTS		
		203
RESEMBLANCE OF THE TALES OF THE EAST AND OF EUROPE		
		204
CAUSES OF HUMAN CREDULITY		
		206
—————		
DARK AGES OF EUROPE		
		211
MERLIN		
		216
ST. DUNSTAN		
		222
—————		
COMMUNICATION OF EUROPE AND THE SARACENS		
		231
GERBERT, POPE SILVESTER II		
		<i>ib.</i>
BENEDICT THE NINTH		
		234
GREGORY THE SEVENTH		
		235
DUFF, KING OF SCOTLAND		
		241

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-04417-2 - Lives of the Necromancers: Or, an Account of the Most Eminent Persons in Successive Ages, who have Claimed for Themselves, or to whom has been Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power

William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS.	xix
	Page
MACBETH	243
VIRGIL	249
ROBERT OF LINCOLN	252
MICHAEL SCOT	254
THE DEAN OF BADAJOZ	255
MIRACLE OF THE TUB OF WATER	257
INSTITUTION OF FRIARS	259
ALBERTUS MAGNUS	260
ROGER BACON	263
THOMAS AQUINAS	266
PETER OF APONO	268
ENGLISH LAW OF HIGH TREASON	269
ZIITO	273
TRANSMUTATION OF METALS	277
ARTEPHIUS	278
RAYMOND LULLI	<i>ib.</i>
ARNOLD OF VILLENEUVE	281
ENGLISH LAWS RESPECTING TRANSMUTATION	282
—	
REVIVAL OF LETTERS	285
JOAN OF ARC	286
ELEANOR COBHAM, DUCHESS OF GLOUCESTER	294
RICHARD III	297
—	
SANGUINARY PROCEEDINGS	
AGAINST WITCHCRAFT	299
SAVONAROLA	311
TRITHEMIUS	318
LUTHER	320
CORNELIUS AGRIPPA	322
FAUSTUS	330
SABELLICUS	358
PARACELSUS	359
CARDAN	362

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-04417-2 - Lives of the Necromancers: Or, an Account of the Most Eminent Persons in Successive Ages, who have Claimed for Themselves, or to whom has been Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power

William Godwin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

XX	CONTENTS.	Page
QUACKS, WHO IN COOL BLOOD UNDERTOOK		
	TO OVERREACH MANKIND	364
	BENVENUTO CELLINI	365
	NOSTRADAMUS	372
	DOCTOR DEE	373
	EARL OF DERBY	398
	KING JAMES'S VOYAGE TO NORWAY	399
	JOHN FIAN	404
	KING JAMES'S DEMONOLOGY	405
	STATUTE, 1 JAMES I	407
	FORMAN AND OTHERS	408
	LATEST IDEAS OF JAMES ON THE SUBJECT	412
	LANCASHIRE WITCHES	<i>ib.</i>
	LADY DAVIES	418
	EDWARD FAIRFAX	419
	DOCTOR LAMB	<i>ib.</i>
	URBAIN GRANDIER	421
	ASTROLOGY	423
	WILLIAM LILLY	426
	MATTHEW HOPKINS	432
	CROMWEL	437
	DOROTHY MATELEY	440
	WITCHES HANGED BY SIR MATTHEW HALE	443
	WITCHCRAFT IN SWEDEN	448
	WITCHCRAFT IN NEW ENGLAND	454
—		
	CONCLUSION	463